

#784 Preaching and the teleological temptation

This week we pick up again on a theme we've featured throughout the past several months—namely, the preacher's task. Our writer is Matt Metevelis, a chaplain and pastor who lives in Las Vegas, Nevada, and whose last piece for Thursday Theology was [a book review](#) that we posted last summer. We're happy to share with you his thoughts on the ultimate goals of preaching, and we remind you that we welcome our readers' feedback on everything we publish in this space.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team.

Preaching and the Teleological Temptation

What kind of speaking is preaching? I have struggled with this question quite a bit. What exactly am I trying to *do* when I get up there on Sunday morning? Should I educate, enlighten, or entertain? (My congregation very strongly prefers the third option). Just what is it that this unique craft of preaching is trying to accomplish?

Preaching at its epistemic core is public speaking for the church. The sermon is an address of the preacher to the congregation in order to impart a new idea or clarify an old one. It can be understood as an exercise in rhetoric. Rhetoric, defined best by Aristotle is, "observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (*Rhetoric* I.2). The preaching task can easily be compared to the burden placed upon every public speaker, to persuade. All public speakers must pay attention to

the way in which they will change hearts and minds by their speech.

Aristotle argues that there are three major forms of persuasive speaking: the political, the forensic, and the epideictic. Aristotle differentiates these by the end to which they are attempting to persuade. The political seeks to point to the expediency or in expediency of an action, the forensic seeks to persuade hearers about the justice or injustice of a case, and the epideictic or “ornamental” form of speaking seeks to illustrate virtue or vice for imitation or scorn.

Preachers have utilized many of these forms, but we must say that preaching in the Christian church is a rhetorical exercise that defies this three-fold categorization because it has its own end. This is because all other forms of rhetoric have ends that are penultimate; they belong only to the limitations of the fallen world. Preachers are divinely charged with the difficult task of pointing beyond the noble but often frustrated searching of humanity after expediency, justice, and valor. The sermon, properly given, seeks to do more than “persuade” its hearers of some new idea or course of action. By using the preacher, God seeks to give an answer to the questions, fears, and agonies raised by the tumult of a sinful and decaying creation. That answer comes in the form preaching’s ultimate aim and end, the person who has become the place where all human striving and suffering ceases. Preaching is different speech because its only *telos* can be Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

Many preachers in North America today invert this pattern by finding in the cross of Christ a way to set out and discover a new *telos* more easily apprehended by their congregations. Instead of offering Christ crucified as the culmination of their sermon, Christ crucified becomes a necessary act which leads to more glorious possibilities. Christ’s dying on the cross becomes

variously an act of selfless love which must be imitated and adored, a necessary step which allows us to gain access to salvation through our complete conversion and fervent efforts to get others to do the same, the source of a new life for ourselves which opens up new dimensions of spiritual and material potential, a conscientious denial of the power of "empire" which is a clarion call for us to work to create a just world more in line with "God's preferred future," and an example of patience and trust to follow as we bear our own crosses in this life. All of these are well-meaning and laudable. Many have arisen out of a deep engagement with the problems and issues that persist in the modern world and are a result of serious concern and study. But all of these make the same fundamental mistake. Rather than seeing the crucified Jesus as the end they fall into the teleological temptation and demote him to a means.

Jesus and his cross become a vehicle conveying one to another destination. And that destination is usually one that terminates within the wills of the hearers to do more works. In the hands of preachers using the cross of Jesus to encourage these works, they are new and sanctified works to be sure. But they are still worldly works. Preaching under this guise pulls the congregation back into Aristotle's forms of rhetoric. The preacher might argue that the church needs to do something expedient like some new method to grow a congregation (political). The preacher might argue the cross as evidence of injustices, in the sinful self or in the political structures of the world, which must be confirmed and corrected (forensic). The preacher might even point to the works of Jesus on the cross as virtues to be imitated by individuals or the church as a whole (epideictic). By degenerating into worldly rhetoric this kind of preaching takes penultimate aims—which rise and fall with the capricious fortunes of this world—and confuses them with the ultimate announcement of the entire world's end, and the new beginning in

Jesus Christ. All of these errors, in a phrase, place the gospel before the law, often with disastrous consequences.

All these preachers will insist that they are preserving the orthodox core of Christianity by making Christ a vital foundation for spiritual life. They are right in that they make Christ vital and necessary, but only as an indispensable means and not the ultimate end. Many earnest Lutheran preachers who claim to be “theologians of the cross” will satisfy themselves in these errors by having made the cross an indispensable means for bigger goals. But speaking of the cross as a foundational event does not avoid the risk of having it ignored. Indeed, many things are “foundational” and “vital” that we could care less about. Take for example my car keys. In order to start my car, get to work, and carry on many things I need in my life, I need my car keys. Whenever I misplace my keys (usually when I’m running late) I find it very distressing. Once I have them I am very thankful. But when I unlock the doors and fire up the engine, they are out of my thoughts even as they jingle and jangle with every bump on the road. Plenty of things can be “vital” in my life while mattering very little to me in my day-to-day business as the source of my longings, my inspirations, and my hopes. Jesus, if he possess this kind of means-only vitality, exists in an eerily similar place in our church and culture, revered even as he is ignored.

Christ and his cross cannot just be a principle used to adorn bigger ideas. This is the core error of the teleological temptation. Proper law/gospel preaching seeks to counter the error of the teleological temptation by making sure that the law which works on our wills is always separate from the gospel which works on our inner being to make us new. The goal of a good law/gospel preacher will always be to keep Christ front and center. By the law properly preached, God calls us to awareness of our limitations even as we are encouraged to make do the best

we can for our neighbor under the world's fallen state. But in the gospel, given in its fullness, Jesus Christ becomes crucified for us in our hearing as the end and literally the death of our grief, sin, sorrow, accusations, fears, doubts, limitations, and worldly works. The law is not a "preparation" for the gospel—and the gospel is not the law's purification, solving its problems or resolving its paradoxes. To be truly good news, it must be something truly new and pointing only to the acts of God in Jesus Christ which are apart and utterly free from the law. These can only be found on the cross. The cross of Jesus Christ is not where we go to hear how to fix the world or live our best lives now; rather, the cross is where we are brought to that holy heartbreaking silence so that we can hear God's promises and know that God means them. Preaching is not a vehicle that the Holy Spirit through Jesus uses to take us someplace exciting and new; it is the place where the crucified God comes to meet us. When the gospel is preached, God comes in the crucified Christ to dwell with the congregation. Hearing the sermon, they are reclaimed by Christ in faith. In the words of the preacher, He is bleeding and crucified for them. This is something Aristotle could have never imagined. We preachers neglect it great cost.

Matt Metevelis